

Sperry Univac computers might carry news of Moscow Olympics

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The news the world gets from the 1980 Olympics in Moscow might travel through Sperry Univac computers made in the Twin Cities.

The Soviet Union reportedly has chosen Sperry Univac to provide a message-switching network for the Tass news agency and all foreign news agencies for the Olympics.

The sale of such an automated communications network requires approval by the U.S. Commerce Department. The Tass project could represent about \$20-million worth of Univac 1100-series computers, to be manufactured at the company's plant in Roseville.

BUT U.S. approval of the sale probably won't be automatic or speedy. Officials of the Defense Department and the CIA are said to be anxious about potential military adaptations of the computers by the Soviets.

International Business Machines Corp. (IBM) and Burroughs Corp. reportedly discussed the project with the Soviets but were not successful bidders for the contract. Sperry Univac declined to discuss the deal.

"It's too sensitive," said one Univac spokesman. "I can't deny it, but I can't say anything, either." Another Univac official referred to the Tass project as "a potential order."

Western media coverage of the 1980 Olympics is expected to be massive. In addition to supporting the Soviet news agency's own press service during the Olympic games, the Tass project would assist coverage by foreign news services, whose stories would be switched through Moscow with the Univac system.

The project has been brewing in Moscow and Washington for years. Export control authorities originally told U.S. computer firms that no advanced message-switching network for the Soviets would be approved in Washington. The U.S. officials had assumed that any experience with the computer network could help the Soviets build up their military communications capability, thus creating potential dangers to U.S. security.

A YEAR AGO, Control Data faced similar objections in Washington. The Bloomington-based firm was denied an export license for its large-scale Cyber 76 computer. The \$13-million computer had been ordered for weather research in Moscow as part of a global network.

"These message-switching systems normally undergo pretty extensive review in Washington," said a computer-industry insider who is familiar with the federal government's export licensing process. "The fear is that they have command-and-control applications for military communications. Some of these systems can be modified very easily."

But the Soviets reportedly have appealed to the U.S. government to reverse its opposition to the Tass project. The United States cannot

logically urge greater rights for western press coverage inside the Soviet Union while denying Tass an opportunity to upgrade its news operations, Soviet officials contend.

Because the Tass network is intended to help western media coverage of the Olympics, the Soviets reportedly have indicated they also would blame the White House for hampering worldwide coverage of the Olympics if approval of the network was blocked.

Sperry Univac's application for an export license is pending before the Commerce Department's office of export administration. Before reaching a decision, the office will consult an advisory group comprised of representatives of the CIA and the Departments of State, Defense and Energy. The U.S. government is expected to rule favorably on the project if proper safeguards are built into the system, according to Electronic News, a weekly trade publication.

Approval by the Paris-based Free World Coordinating Committee, an affiliate of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, routinely follows U.S. approval of such exports.